

# News and Revolution— A Junction of All the People

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a FREE PRESS.  
Adams, 1768<sup>1</sup>

The first story in the first newspaper printed in America seems remarkably well chosen:

The Christianized *Indians* in some parts of *Plimouth*, have newly appointed a day of Thanksgiving to God for his Mercy in supplying their extrem and pinching Necessities under their late want of Corn & for His giving them now a prospect of a very *Comfortable Harvest*. Their Example might be worth mentioning.

However, if survival was its goal, other items in this issue of *Public Occurrences Both FORREIGN and DOMESTICK*, printed in Boston on Sept. 25, 1690, appear to have been selected rather cavalierly. The paper's publisher, Benjamin Harris, included an attack on some Indians who had fought with the English against the French—"miserable Salvages," he called them—and an allusion to a rumor that the king of France had cuckolded his son.<sup>2</sup>

The instructions given the governor of Massachusetts by the British government had included a warning about the "great inconvenience [that] may arise by the liberty of printing."<sup>3</sup> When *Publick Occurrences* appeared, the governor and council of the colony expressed their "high Resentment and Disallowance of said Pamphlet," which, they said, "contained Reflections of a very high nature: As also sundry doubtful and uncertain Reports."<sup>4</sup> The first issue of America's first newspaper was also its last.

Benjamin Harris does not seem the sort of publisher capable of convincing a governor to endure the "inconvenience" of a newspaper. Harris was a rabid anti-Catholic with an eye for the sensational. The first issue of a newspaper he had published in London in 1679, *Domestick Intelligence*, not only began with a report on a man found hanging "by the Arms in a Wood . . . with his Head and Hands cut off, and his Bowels pulled out" but included a tidbit about "a Popish Priest . . .



ten newsletter that had been distributed by its editor and publisher—the town's postmaster, John Campbell. Campbell filled his printed weekly primarily with news of English and European politics taken from London papers—usually in the form of proclamations, formal letters or official statements, such as the pair of speeches introduced by these deferential phrases in the fourth issue of the *News-Letter*: "The Humble Address of the House of Commons, Presented to Her Majesty . . . To which Her Majesty return'd Her most Gracious Answer, in the following words. . . ." Campbell's paper also included news of the arrival of ships and even reports on fires, accidents, court cases and acts of piracy. (Blackbeard's death in a hand-to-hand battle was reported in 1719.) The failings of England's allies, the sexual activities of monarchs, and other potentially "inconvenient" stories, however, appear to have been ignored. The *Boston News-Letter* survived for 72 years.<sup>7</sup>

Along with its argument that the news in general tends to bind societies, this book has maintained that the newspaper in particular tends of necessity to be a temperate, if not a conservative medium. The failure of Harris' incautious paper would seem to support this theory, as does the survival of Campbell's tame *Boston News-Letter*. However, Harris' and Campbell's successors in colonial print shops in the years leading up to the American Revolution, along with the editors involved in the struggles that grew out of the French Revolution later in the century, would help create quite a different perception of this medium. "Four hostile newspapers are more to be dreaded than a hundred thousand bayonets," Napoleon would declare.<sup>8</sup>

The politics of journalism appeared to change in the 18th century. Why were newspapers, with investments and reputations to protect, leading revolutions? And how were rebels such as Samuel Adams able to forge news, that great unifier of societies, into a weapon in their struggles to topple "tyrants"?

## The American Revolution

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"The Revolution was effected before the war commenced," John Adams concluded. "The Revolution was in the minds and hearts of the people. . . . This radical change in the principles, opinions, sentiments, and affections of the people, was the real American Revolution."<sup>9</sup>

The struggle for "minds and hearts" in the years leading up to the Declaration of Independence was fought with word of mouth in the streets. It was fought with handwritten letters, often sent by formalized "committees of correspondence." It was fought with pamphlets, such as those written by Thomas Paine. But the most powerful weapons in this struggle to persuade, in what Adams calls the "real American Revolution," were the colonial newspapers.

Britain's American colonies learned their journalism from the Mother country. English newspapers were widely circulated after they arrived in American harbors, and articles reprinted from their pages dominated early colonial newspapers. However, the example set by London's journalists in the 18th century was not necessarily one British monarchs and the governors they appointed wanted Americans to follow.

The burst of freedom England's press had experienced with the expiration of the Licensing Act in 1695 had made possible the development (alongside fact-laden publications such as the various *Posts* and the *Daily Courant*) of a group of remarkably literate journals of opinion edited by writers the likes of Joseph Addison, Richard Steele, Jonathan Swift, and Daniel Defoe. At a time when public opinion seemed to have gained an increased hold on the political fortunes of the nation, the British public had access to a variety of unusually well-argued points of view for use in formulating its opinions. "What I approve I defend; what I dislike I censure," Defoe proclaimed in 1712 in the preface to a collection of articles from his *Review*.<sup>10</sup>

American journalists borrowed a style from these publications; the young apprentice printer Benjamin Franklin, for one, consciously set out to imitate Addison's writings from the *Spectator*.<sup>11</sup> They also borrowed a political aggressiveness. As early as 1721, Benjamin's older brother, James, editor of Boston's fourth newspaper, the *New-England Courant*, took the liberty of censuring a policy he disliked; he began printing essays and letters assailing efforts to inoculate people against the smallpox then raging through Boston. (This, alas, was the first American newspaper crusade.)<sup>12</sup>

However, the freedom to write their minds that colonial newspaper editors appropriated from their models in Britain had its limits. Daniel Defoe had served time in jail before he founded his *Review*. (Defoe's professed likes and dislikes may also have been influenced by subsidies from patrons in the government.)<sup>13</sup> James Franklin served time in jail when a satire in his *Courant*, implying that the governor was slow to pursue pirates, hit too close to home for the governor of Massachusetts to tolerate.<sup>14</sup> Prior restraint of the press had indeed become more difficult to establish in England or its colonies now that publications no longer had to be approved in advance by licensers, but editors were still subject to postpublication penalties, particularly under the common-law prohibition on the printing of derogatory, potentially inflammatory remarks about the government or its members—known as "seditious libel." That had been Defoe's crime.<sup>15</sup>

Here America was to make a contribution of its own. In 1735 John Peter Zenger was tried for seditious libel following a series of attacks in Zenger's newspaper, the *New-York Weekly Journal*, on the colony's particularly arbitrary and self-interested governor, William Cosby. There was no doubt that Zenger had printed the criticism, and the judge accurately instructed the jury that under the common-law definition of seditious libel the criticism was no less libelous if true. But Zenger's lawyer, Andrew Hamilton, delivered an impassioned call to defend the "cause of liberty . . . the liberty both of exposing and opposing arbitrary power . . . by speaking and writing truth." The jury ignored the judge's instructions and found the German-born printer innocent.<sup>16</sup>

So American newspapers inherited a style with which to criticize; they inherited and, through the Zenger case, even expanded the freedom to criticize. And when the British attempted to impose taxes upon colonies already suffering from the depression that followed the French and Indian War, American newspapers were presented with perceived injustices at which they could aim their criticisms. The cycle of tax and protest began in 1765 with the Stamp Act, which required, among other things, that printers pay for a stamp on each sheet of paper they used.

English newspapers had been subject to a stamp tax since 1712, but American journalists saw in the Stamp Act—the "fatal *Black-Act*," one termed it<sup>17</sup>—not only an ex-

## Women in Journalism

No woman could simply choose to get a job working at a colonial newspaper. That is made clear by the stories of a few of the women who managed to succeed in finding such work.

- Anna Catharine Zenger edited the *New-York Weekly Journal* for eight months, but this was only because her husband, John Peter Zenger, was in jail awaiting his momentous trial in 1735. Anna Catharine Zenger also ran the newspaper for more than two years after her husband's death in 1746.
- Elizabeth Timothy published the *South Carolina Gazette* after her husband Lewis died in 1738. According to Benjamin Franklin, who was a business partner in the paper, Elizabeth made a success out of what had been a floundering, poorly run operation.

A number of other women also found their way into American print shops in these years by inheriting them. For men, the normal first step to newspaper work was an apprenticeship, but apprenticeships in print shops were not given to young women. And women faced an even earlier obstacle: getting an education.

- The first woman to apply for a license to print in the English colonies, Diana Nuthead, in

1693, widow of the printer William Nuthead, signed with a mark instead of signature. Apparently, like many women (and a significant but much smaller percentage of men), no one had bothered to teach her to write. If Diana Nuthead printed anything it has not survived.

The level of the talent denied American journalism by such discrimination is made clear by two others of the exceptions, a mother and daughter.

- William Goddard founded the *Providence Gazette* in 1762 and then the *Pennsylvania Chronicle* in 1767. Each time William, who was an argumentative and inconstant fellow, ran into trouble and each time his mother, Sarah, and his sister, Mary Katherine, took over and improved the business. In 1773, William started yet another newspaper, the *Maryland Journal*. Sarah had died in 1770, but Mary Katherine Goddard ended up publishing that paper for 10 years. She earned a reputation as one of the best printers in the colonies.

ample of taxation by a body, the English Parliament, in which they were not represented, but a severe threat to the survival of their businesses. In the weeks before the act was to take effect, the *Maryland Gazette*, to choose one example, expressed its anger and fear by affixing to its title the line "Expiring: In uncertain Hopes of a Resurrection to Life again." In its last issue before that dreaded day, Nov. 1, 1765, the *Gazette* dressed itself in black borders and bid farewell to its readers.<sup>18</sup>

These suddenly aroused publications would not succumb without a struggle, however. New York's lieutenant governor, Cadwallader Colden, complained that they employed "every falsehood that malice could invent to serve their purpose of exciting the People to disobedience of the Laws & to Sedition."<sup>19</sup> They succeeded. The virulence and the scope of the protest made the Stamp Act impossible to enforce. An issue of an unstamped paper appeared in Maryland on Dec. 10 titled *An Apparition of the late Mary*



During the protest over the Stamp Act, many colonial newspapers proclaimed themselves ready to cease publication rather than pay for the hated stamp. These paper tentatively began to reappear, without the stamp, in the months after the act was supposed to take effect (on Nov. 1, 1765). Here are issues of the Maryland Gazette for Oct. 10, 1765; Jan. 30, 1766; and Feb. 20, 1766.

land Gazette which is not Dead but only Sleepth. On Jan. 30, 1766, *The Maryland Gazette, Reviving* was published, also on unstamped paper; on Feb. 20 *The Maryland Gazette, Revived* appeared.<sup>20</sup> The Stamp Act was repealed on March 18.

Colonial newspapers were roused to a new wave of protests the next year when Parliament approved the Townshend Acts, which imposed duties on American imports of glass, lead, paint, tea and, significantly, paper. "Nonimportation agreements," policed in large part through the press, led the colonies to another victory: the removal in 1770 of all the duties except that on tea.

The period of quiet and renewed prosperity that followed was not shattered until 1773, when Parliament decided to allow the East India Company to market its tea directly in America, with a price advantage over local merchants. The press worked to awaken the colonies to this new, if more subtle, threat, and from that point events proceeded rapidly. The Boston Tea Party, planned in the house of an editor of the *Boston Gazette*, Benjamin Edes, was staged in 1773. Parliament retaliated against Boston in 1774 with the Intolerable Acts. (The name by which these laws became known is itself evidence of the hold revolutionaries had gained on the levers of opinion.) The First Continental Congress met in 1774. The first shot was fired in 1775.

There may be no better historical example of a press *engagé* than the American newspapers that led this decade-long struggle. They festooned themselves with polemical woodcuts: divided snakes, death's-heads as mocking substitutes for tax stamps, or coffins (designed by Paul Revere) to represent the victims of the Boston Massacre. They displayed the names of those "Enemies to their Country" who persisted in importing proscribed British goods. Their rhetoric was heated (and occasionally almost prescient): "Shall the island BRITAIN enslave this great continent of AMERICA which is more than ninety nine times bigger, and is capable of supporting hundreds of millions of mil-

lions of people?" demanded the *Massachusetts Spy* in 1773. "Be astonished all mankind, at her superlative folly!"<sup>21</sup>

These newspapers spared no pejoratives. British officials and their supporters were, variously, "serpents," "guileful betrayers," "diabolical Tools of Tyrants," or "*Men totally abandoned to Wickedness.*"<sup>22</sup> When the goal was a boycott of tea, the newspapers directed their scorn at tea, which one writer called "a slow poison," which causes "spasms, vapors, hypochondrias, apoplexies of the serous kind, palsies, dropsies, rheumatisms, consumptions. . . ."<sup>23</sup> Even advertising columns were turned over to the cause, as in this takeoff on the ads run by unhappy spouses, signed "American Liberty": "My reason for leaving him was because he behaved in an arbitrary and cruel manner. . . ."<sup>24</sup>

News coverage too was bent to political purposes. During the extended campaign against the Townshend Acts, for example, papers throughout the colonies began printing a regular series called the "Journal of Occurrences," which detailed outrages alleged to have been committed by British troops in Boston:

*Dec. 12, 1768. A Married Lady of this Town was the other Evening, when passing from one House to another, taken hold of by a Soldier, who otherways behaved to her with great rudeness. . . . Another Woman was pursued by a Soldier into a House near the North End, who dared to enter the same, and behave with great Insolence. . . .*<sup>25</sup>

Clues to the reliability of these reports can be found in the facts that victims went unnamed and that the Boston papers themselves waited months to reprint them. This installment—from John Holt's *New-York Journal*, Dec. 29, 1768—did not appear in the *Boston Evening-Post* until Feb. 6, 1769.<sup>26</sup>

After American protests succeeded in forcing the British to retreat, the papers were effusive with pride in their accomplishments:

'Tis truth (with deference to the college)  
Newspapers are the spring of knowledge,  
The general source throughout the nation,  
Of every modern conversation.  
What would this mighty people do,  
If there, alas! were nothing new.

This poem, from the *New-York Journal* in 1770, concluded with even less humility:

Our service you can't express,  
The good we do you hardly guess;  
There's not a want of human kind,  
But we a remedy can find.<sup>27</sup>

A Son of Liberty, writing in the *Providence Gazette*, was similarly enthusiastic: "The press hath never done greater service since its first invention."<sup>28</sup> Tory commentators agreed on the scope, though not the merit, of the press's accomplishment. "Every suggestion that could tend to lessen the attachment to the mother Country, and to raise an Odium against her," wrote Lieutenant Governor Colden in a letter to England, "have been repeatedly published."<sup>29</sup> Whatever potential the news and the newspaper have as

weapons against authority appears to have been exploited in Britain's American colonies during the years 1765 to 1775. What powers were these Patriot editors tapping?

News organs—from busybodies to television networks—fret and vex “tyrants” simply by casting a harsh light on machinations intended to be viewed through a romantic haze or accomplished in the dark. The more thoughtful or aggressive journalists peek behind carefully constructed facades and deconstruct carefully constructed policies. No “civilized Government upon Earth,” Massachusetts Governor Francis Bernard complained in 1768, could function effectively with its private deliberations “canvassed by Tavern Politicians, and censured by News Paper Libellers.”<sup>30</sup> It is at least true that no government on earth, civilized or uncivilized, has relished such intrusions.<sup>31</sup>

Those who govern societies are also discomfited by the newsmonger's interest—driven by an attraction to controversy and the unusual—in imbalances within a society (a price advantage for the East India Company) or injustices within a society (“taxation without representation”). Authorities thrive on good news, while news organs, though they may prefer victory to defeat for the society as a whole, thrive on disputes, errors and scandals among those who lead the society. “The printers,” Thomas Jefferson would complain years later, “can never leave us in a state of perfect rest and union of opinion.”<sup>32</sup> Of course, “a state of perfect rest and union of opinion,” were it possible to achieve, would be disastrous for newspaper sales.<sup>33</sup>

In the decade leading up to the American Revolution, a hostile press certainly created unrest and helped dissolve whatever union of opinion had existed between British officials and their American subjects. But was this primarily an expression of the anti-authoritarian power of the press? British authorities, from Governor Bernard to King George himself, may have felt the sting of American newspapers. Nonetheless, the pain of having private deliberations made public, the pain of having injustices and imbalances publicized, would hardly have proved fatal to British rule by themselves. Because it wields neither stick nor stone, the press's own direct power to hurt boils down to a power to embarrass. And embarrassment alone does not topple systems of governments.

The true power of the prerevolutionary press is not to be found in its ability to wound the British. The true power of this press was its ability to enfranchise and unify the Americans. “Had it not been for the continual informations from the Press,” wrote “A Countryman” in the *Providence Gazette* during the battle against the Stamp Act, “a junction of all the people on this northern continent . . . would have been scarcely conceivable.”<sup>34</sup> The role of the news in the American Revolution is best understood not as an uncharacteristic anti-authoritarian outburst but as an entirely characteristic exercise in animating and binding a new society, in producing “a junction” of a majority of the American people.

“The basic problem facing the propagandists in nearly every period,” writes Philip Davidson in his study of the use of propaganda in the American Revolution, “was the unification of their own group. . . .”<sup>35</sup> In attempting to quantify the growing sense of unity and community expressed in American newspapers in the years leading up to the Revolution, the political scientist Richard Merritt found that from 1762 to 1775 these papers referred to the American colonies as a single unit almost four times as frequently as they had from 1735 to 1761. Merritt discovered a similarly dramatic increase in the newspapers' use of terms such as “Americans” to describe the colonists, terms that imply the existence of an American political community.<sup>36</sup>